



Northern Illinois Conference

OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SAMPLE SAFE SANCTUARIES POLICY

This is a sample document with general best practices; this is not considered legal advice. Each church is encouraged to consult with their legal counsel or other professional advisors as part of the creation, adoption, implementation and revision of specific policies and procedures for the prevention of abuse in their individual context.

Each local church context is unique. As such, each church should gather a team to create, review, update, and implement a Safe Sanctuaries policy that meets the needs of their individual context.

The conference recommends that this team include representatives of the following: Age-level ministries, Staff/Pastor-Parish Relations Committee, Board of Trustees, and Finance Committee, as well as others whom they invite to participate in the team's work. You might also consider who in your church has experience in social work or the foster care system, in the insurance field, and/or in legal/liability.

I. Introduction

As a Christian community of faith, we pledge to conduct the ministry of the gospel in ways that assure the safety and spiritual growth of all children, youth and vulnerable adults as well as those who serve in ministry with and to them. As such:

- We will follow reasonable safety measures in the screening and selection of leadership, both paid and volunteer.
- We will implement prudent operational procedures in all programs, events and ministries.
- We will educate all our leadership—both paid and volunteer—with children, youth and vulnerable adults regarding the use of all appropriate policies and methods.
- We will have a clearly defined procedure to reporting an observed or suspected incident of abuse that conforms to the requirements of state law, and we will be prepared to respond to media inquiries if an incident occurs.

Nothing in this policy or procedure is designed to hinder or prevent the investigation of suspected, reported or confirmed violations of any Illinois criminal laws.

II. Theological Rationale

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes a child, welcomes me" (Matthew 18:5). He also said, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6).

Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to those who cannot protect themselves. We affirm this responsibility at each person's baptism by our congregational response, pledging: "With God's help we will so order our lives after the example of Christ, that this person, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal" (Book of Worship, Baptismal Covenant, Congregational Pledge, 11).

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III. Definitions

For the purpose of this policy, we will use the following terms:

- Child or youth: Any person under the age of 18
- Adult: Any person 18 years old or older
- Vulnerable adult: Any person 18 years or older who is in need of special care, support or protection due to diminished physical, mental or emotional capacities or at risk of abuse due to the power dynamics of the situation (e.g. mission work or visitation ministries)
- Leader or volunteer: Any adult—paid or volunteer—who is supervising or assisting with an event, program or ministry
- Youth helper: Any child or youth under the age of 18 who assists with ministries

IV. Scope

This policy shall apply to all activities sponsored by **[church name]**, regardless of location.

This policy does not apply to outside groups utilizing the church's facilities. Rather, outside groups must abide by the requirements stated in the building use agreement¹.

V. Policy

a) Liability Insurance

The Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church administers and oversees a conference-wide property and liability insurance program that includes sexual abuse and misconduct coverage. All churches in the Northern Illinois Conference and their ministries are required to participate in the CWIP; exclusion from such mandatory participation shall be at the sole discretion of The Northern Illinois Conference United Methodist Church Insurance Association.²

b) Screening and Selection

All persons serving in leadership with children, youth or vulnerable adults shall be³:

- An active member of the local ministry for at least six months
- At least 18 years of age
- At least five years older than the oldest person they are supervising/leading (Exception: This does not apply to adults in ministry with vulnerable adults.)

As part of the selection process, applicants must:

¹ A sample NIC Space Sharing Agreement Template can be found at <https://www.umcnic.org/riskmanagement>.

² Per the NIC Standing Rules, section V.E. The NIC Standing Rules can be found in the NIC Journal which is available to be viewed at <https://www.umcnic.org/journal>.

³ When initially creating a new policy or reviewing your current policy, you need to consider:

- Do individuals need to be active participants, or must they be official members of the church in order to work or volunteer with children, youth, or vulnerable adults?
- Given the activity level of your local ministry, how long does someone need to be involved before they should be put in a place of volunteer leadership?
 - Best practice recommends at least six months.
 - If you are in ministry with young adults or college-aged persons and want to encourage their leadership, it is recommended that the timeframe be at least three months for these age groups.

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- Submit an application
- Participate in an interview process as determined by **[local church leadership]**
- Consent to a National Criminal Background Check

Any conviction involving abuse of or harm toward children, youth or vulnerable adults will disqualify the applicant from participating in ministries with children, youth or vulnerable adults. All other convictions will be reviewed by **[local church leadership]** in order to ensure the safety of all involved.

National criminal background checks will be performed on all adult leaders/volunteers at least every three years. ⁴

All documentation collected as part of the application and screening process shall be maintained in a permanent, secure file accessible only to **[persons identified by local church leadership]**.

c) Youth Helpers⁵

Youth helpers are considered children or youth over the age of 13 but under the age of 18 who assist with ministries (e.g. Vacation Bible School).

Youth helpers shall follow all of the same guidelines as adult leaders.

Youth helpers shall never be alone with children without an adult present.

d) Review and Training/Certification

a. Review

The church community shall be informed of the Safe Sanctuaries policy and how the church is working to prevent abuse annually. The church community shall also be notified in advance of Safe Sanctuaries training opportunities.

All volunteers should review the policy annually.

The review should include:

- Local church policy and operational procedures
- Appropriate boundary guidelines
- Appropriate playground/recreational supervision

A comprehensive review of the policy by the Safe Sanctuary review team should be performed every three years.

⁴ When initially creating a new policy or reviewing your current policy, you need to consider: How will you respond to any convictions that are returned? Who will run the background checks? Who will review the background checks? Who will have access to the information gleaned from the background checks? When a criminal conviction is reported, what will you do?

⁵ When initially creating a new policy or reviewing your current policy, you need to consider: What do you want the minimum age that a person must reach before being considered a youth helper? Consider developing a covenant of conduct and expectation to provide support and structure to youth helpers.

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b. Training/Certification

Training/certification may be offered to the following:

- Any leader of church-sponsored ministry with children, youth or vulnerable adults
- Any leader of outside groups that utilize the church facilities for activities with children, youth or vulnerable adults
- Any person in the community who would like to learn more about Safe Sanctuaries and its ministry of abuse prevention

The training/certification shall be led by trained trainers or delivered through a certified online course such as Safe Gatherings. Training/certification is not considered complete until a background check is performed. While many people are trained through other organizations/employment, to help everyone be on the same page, Safe Sanctuaries/Safe Gatherings training is still required of all staff and volunteers.

The training/certification shall include information, explanation, and discussion of the following:

- Appropriate boundary guidelines
- Appropriate supervision
- Appropriate physical and digital/cyber interactions
- Behaviors or other indicators which may signal concerns or abuse
- Requirements of Illinois law for reporting incidents of abuse
- Procedures for reporting observed or suspected incidents or abuse

All leaders shall be trained/certified every three years in the practices of Safe Sanctuaries and a record of attendees shall be kept on file for a minimum of seven years.

e) Activity Procedures

All activities involving children, youth or vulnerable adults shall adhere to the following minimum requirements:

- When possible, there shall be two unrelated adults present.
 - “Unrelated adults” is interpreted as adults who are not related to one another. (The adults may be related to participants, but not to one another.)
 - When two unrelated adults are not able to be present, two related adults shall be present, so long as they are not in a marital relationship.(Married adults may lead together, but there must be at least one more adult present.)
 - If it is not possible to have two adults present at all times, the activity must take place in an open space—indoors or outdoors—where other adults are able to witness the activity and interactions of all involved.
 - It is NOT acceptable to have only one adult present with children, youth or vulnerable adults in a private space, or any space where other adults are not able to witness the activities and interactions of all involved.
 - At no time shall windows be obscured or doors locked to areas where children, youth or vulnerable adults are meeting.(Exception: Active shooter drills or incidents.)

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f) Individual Counseling

Sometimes one-on-one interactions are necessary, specifically in reference to counseling. These interactions must be conducted in an appropriate manner. The clergy-person, staff person, or lay leader shall conduct the meeting in a visible space, meaning that the office door is open or a window is visible and someone can reasonably see all persons in the room, or the meeting shall take place in a public place. Suspected abuse or neglect uncovered in counseling shall be reported in accordance with Illinois state law.

g) Internet and Social Media

Images and names of children, youth and vulnerable adults shall not be utilized on any church website or application without explicit consent. A social media covenant shall be adopted and adhered to by all participants and leaders. This covenant shall be kept on file as an addendum to this policy.

h) Transportation

Per the NIC Church Staff & Volunteer Driver Policy⁶, any person driving a church-owned vehicle or driving a personal vehicle on behalf of the church must consent to a motor vehicle record check⁷ (every three years), be at least 21 years of age, have a valid driver's license for two years, and provide proof of current insurance coverage. When using charter buses or other contracted drivers, the carrier must provide certification that the driver has completed a recent background check and CDL license as needed. All vehicle use requirements set forth by the Board of Trustees shall be followed.

i) Off-Site and Overnight Events

All requirements from section V. e) Activity Procedures shall be adhered to.

Adults and children/youth shall not share beds.

Leaders must obtain medical information and liability release forms for all participants and have access to those records throughout the off-site activity or overnight event. Leaders shall provide parents or guardians with specific information regarding the schedule, sleeping arrangements, leader-to-participant ratios and emergency contact information.

⁶ NIC Church Staff & Volunteer Driver Policy can be found online at <https://www.umcnic.org/riskmanagement>.

⁷ When initially creating a new policy or reviewing your current policy, you need to consider: How will you handle the information? Who will review and receive the information? What will disqualify an applicant from serving? Where will the information be stored, and who will have access?

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j) **Missionaries and Mission Trips**

When engaging in mission work—whether domestically or globally—missionaries are intrinsically put in a place of power over the persons they serve. Due to these power dynamics, all persons participating in mission work shall follow the screening, selection, training, activity, counseling, transportation, and off-site/overnight event regulations as set forth above.

For youth under the age of 18 on a mission trip, review of the Safe Sanctuaries policy is needed before departure.

k) **Daycare/Preschool Requirements**

In addition to the requirements set forth in this policy, the church's daycare program shall also adhere to relevant requirements established by the state of Illinois. Where the two requirements are in conflict, the more conservative approach shall be taken.

VI. **Reporting and Response**

a) **Documentation and Reporting**

All incidents—including accidents and suspected abuse—shall be documented in writing on the [name of form or process for documentation] and kept on file. The form is available [physical and/or virtual location(s)].

In the event of an accident or injury, one copy of the **[name of form]** shall be given to the parent or guardian of the affected child, youth or vulnerable adult. In the event that an allegation of abuse or misconduct is made against a volunteer or lay leader, a report shall be made to the ministry area leader who shall report it to the lead pastor.

In the event that an allegation of abuse is made against a clergy member or staff person, a report shall be made to the chairperson of the Staff/Pastor-Parish Relations Committee.

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b) Mandatory State Reporting

All reporting of alleged or actual incidents of child or vulnerable adult abuse must strictly follow Illinois State law. Although there is no obligation for private citizens to report evidence of most crimes, many Illinois citizens have a legal duty to report when working with children and vulnerable adults.

- *The Requirement for Clergy to Report Citation: Comp. Stat. Ch. 325, § 5/4⁸*
- *Illinois Online Child Abuse Neglect Reporting⁹*

Failure to report certain acts and crimes against minors is a criminal offense. These include serious bodily injury, serious physical injury, sexually violent offense(s), and other offenses that inflict serious injury (other than accidents)

A leader who has reasonable cause to suspect that abuse has occurred should secure the safety (if possible) of the child, youth or vulnerable adult and then immediately report the incident to appropriate law enforcement.

It is never the responsibility of a leader to investigate allegations of abuse.

c) Response

All allegations shall be taken seriously.

A quick, compassionate, and unified response to an alleged incident of child or adult abuse will be initiated following the direction of the appointed clergy in the local church and in consultation with the Episcopal Office of the Northern Illinois Conference.

In the case that the alleged incident involves the appointed clergy, the response will be directed by the Episcopal Office of the Northern Illinois Conference.

A response will include appropriate pastoral care and support for all involved in the allegation, including the alleged perpetrator(s), alleged victim(s) and their families.

⁸ Information on Clergy as Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/clergy-mandatory-reporters-child-abuse-and-neglect/>

⁹ The website for reporting abuse is <https://dcfonlinereporting.dcf.illinois.gov/>. The Online Reporting System should only be used for non- life threatening and non-emergency instances of abuse and neglect. If you believe the abuse or neglect you are reporting requires immediate action, you MUST call the Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline at [800-25-ABUSE \(800-252-2873\)](tel:800-25-ABUSE) to make your report.

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d) Interaction with the Media

In the event that an incident receives media attention, the only persons authorized to speak to the media are the lead pastor and District Superintendent or a representative of the Episcopal Office.

If approached by the media, all others should not comment and instead endeavor to help the media find the authorized spokesperson(s).¹⁰

VII. Policy Review¹¹

A team comprised of representatives of age-level ministries, the Staff/Pastor-Parish Relations Committee, Board of Trustees, and Finance Committee, as well as others whom they invite to participate in the team's work, shall be responsible for reviewing this policy on an annual basis for relevance and adherence to requirements established by the Northern Illinois Conference. A comprehensive review of the policy by the Safe Sanctuary review team should be performed every three years.

Adopted (date)

¹⁰ When initially creating a new policy or reviewing your current policy, you need to consider: Who should be the designated media contact, in the case that an incident attracts media attention?

¹¹ When initially creating a new policy or reviewing your current policy, you need to consider:

- What are the benefits or risks of your physical facilities? For example: Do you have a playground? Is it enclosed or is it open to the public? Do you have half-doors or windows to view into classrooms and offices? Where are your entrances?
- What forms will be referenced in the policy and utilized in procedures? (e.g. liability release forms, medical forms, background check consent forms, volunteer applications, accident/injury reports, incident/suspected abuse reports, etc.) Where can the fillable forms be accessed and how is that advertised? How should reports be submitted? Who should review them? Where will completed forms be stored and who will have access?

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RESOURCES

Book resources:

- Safer Sanctuaries: Nurturing Trust within Faith Communities by Discipleship Ministries (various authors)
- Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church for Children and Youth by Joy Thornburg Melton
- Safe Sanctuaries in a Virtual World by Joy Thornburg Melton and Michelle Foster-Beckerleg
- Safe Sanctuaries: The Church Responds to Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of Older Adults by Joy Thornburg Melton

Online resources:

- Northern Illinois Conference: www.umcnic.org/safesanctuaries
- Discipleship Ministries: www.umcdiscipleship.org/equipping-leaders/safe-sanctuaries

Human resources:

- Rev. Fabiola Grandon-Mayer, Director of Connectional Ministries fgrandon-mayer@umcnic.org
- Elizabeth Stahl, Risk Manager – estahl@umcnic.org